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LES FRANCOFOLIES

Isabelle Boulay rehearses at Place des Arts for her two-show Carte Blanche series of country music: one will focus on contemporary songs, the other on Quebec pioneers. MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE

GROWING UP IN GASPÉ, Isabelle Boulay first heard and sang down-home songs of love and loss. She dips back into that childhood source to perform 'the music of the heart and human dignity'

Returning to her country roots

JUAN RODRIGUEZ SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Another song cycle (Tout un jour), another triumph in Quebec, France and Europe for Isabelle Boulay. Fifteen years in the business, she played the Olympia in Paris 12 times last year, and won a Félix award for best stage show.

A Carte Blanche at the FrancoFolies would be a welcome way to close the books. But the huge star from the Gaspésie felt she had earned the right to do something far different than the usual all-star walk-ons. She wanted to get back to her roots, to the first songs she sang – francophone country songs.

It's one thing for Boulay and musiciens to offer her usual well-oiled state of grace. But when they relax off-stage "we plunge dans le country. C'est le bonheur total à vivre.

"It takes me back to my childhood in my village of Ste. Félicité. My aunt, a sister of my father, was the eldest girl of the family and lived with my grandmother in the same large house as us, and she played country music records. I always loved spending time with her, so ever since I was 18 months old I heard country songs in my ears, francophone pioneers like Paul Brunelle, Marcel Martel, Le Soldat Lebrun ... What I discovered only later was that there were many French covers of American songs. When I started listening to Willie Nelson and Dwight Yoakam, I heard them in English ...

"I was brought up in the restaurant and bar my parents owned and ran, Le Gourmet. When I started singing as a kid in les bars, 7 until 11, all I sang was country. And when I get on stage at Place des Arts I'm going to start with five songs I sang when I was 8. The show is completely related to my childhood."

Boulay, a small, perfectly proportioned woman with a welcoming smile, makes you feel in her home any place she meets you; this afternoon it's La Petite Ardoise, a French pastry shop/bistro on chic Laurier Ave.

"For me, country is the music of the heart and human dignity. People came to the bar to unwind, socialize, dance, seduce, but I noticed in the bar people who always came to drink alone and think of their *chagrin*. The pain of love, of loss. Their solitude depended on all the rest going on around it, the music, the people. I've always thought that country music washes away *chagrin*. Country songs are like little films, like a soundtrack of our lives. It's a music you can identify with immediately."

That's why her two-night stand is called Complainte et ritournelle. "It's a celebration of life as it is, down to earth. At the same time, it represents a return to the heart that lifts us in the most elemental way, in the best sense of the term."

She's playing with her regular band, led by Julie Lamontagne (a fine jazz pianist in her own right), plus veteran picker Rick Haworth and violinist Jonathan Moorman and guest musicians Stephen Faulkner, Dany Bédar and Paul Daraiche. The first night is devoted to contemporary country (with Mara Tremblay and Monsieur Mono), the second to Quebec's pioneers, with surprise guests.

It was a great thrill for Boulay to come off the road and watch her idol Willie Nelson perform at the Bell Centre last month. "I was in the second row. It was lovely to see at 73 he's still on the road and does music he loves, in a very creative way. Like the Ray Charles early '60s country albums, Willie's voice resonates with harmonics ...

"We go through many ups and downs in life, get older, but our smiles never change. And when I saw him smile I saw the same person I saw on la télé when I was little. It's like the person never changed. It's like our soul, in a way, and if it stays intact we have reason to smile!" Yes, she does speak in that homily-rife style and, yes, she laughs loudly at her lilt.

After Les Francos, Boulay gets down to the serious business of whittling down song choices for her next album, due out late in 2007. "It's a very long process. You get lots of influences, lots of things you like but think you can't sing. I can love to listen to a particular song, but I don't know whether they're for me until I sing them. Some songwriters know me well, write made-to-measure songs. But I want to look for things that correspond to me. The planets play a role, too! Sometimes I get something and I want to hear it right away, but usually I prefer two sessions of two hours each listening to songs, per week. More than that and you don't hear as well. You also have to leave distance between songs. I don't like to mix up too many things at the same time.

"People need culture, not just entertainment. La profondeur de la création allows us to go further. Three years ago I could never do two pure country shows, but people are ready for change."

Isabelle Boulay offers a country music Carte Blanche show tonight and tomorrow at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts, 175 Ste. Catherine St. W., at 8 p.m. Tickets are $42 to $65 at the box office, (514) 842-2112, and Admission, www.admission.com or (514) 790-1245.

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Two young innovatrices court North American audiences

Camille takes an improvisational route while Isabelle Le Doussal does punk-rock-electro

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

A tale of two young singers from France who performed one after the other on Friday, opening night of Les FrancoFolies de Montréal: Camille at a Metropolis packed with expectant fans, and Isabelle Le Doussal of Prototypes, outdoors in a steady drizzle at La Zone Molson Dry. Both are innovators in their chosen genres: Camille's free-form deconstruction of the chanson and Isabelle's minimalist intello-punk insouciance. Both are on mini North American tours, trying to gain a foothold on a continent that considers the French a musical curio a best. There the waters part.

Camille, at 27, has an extraordinary improviser's approach to music, as evidenced in her breakthrough second album Le Fil and subsequent live CD that, based on her show Friday, seems to have been released dangerously early in her career. Yes, her musical imagination makes Björk look like a nervous piker (and Bobby McFerrin a ham). She inhabited some breathtakingly beautiful musical moments that seemed to come out of nowhere, little sound clashes that Camille encourages and manipulates.

Trouble is – and this might seem niggling considering her liberation of the chanson and her set's many lovely flows – she doesn't go far enough. She promises more than she delivers; her show has devolved into a tease and, worse, a schtick, a collection of clever bits.

Dressed in her now trademark body-clinging white dress, fooling sound with her habitual ream of chiffon and elastic wire, she connected with explorations of identity, by turns playful and humorous, edgy and disturbing. (On her recurring song, Janine, she dueled linguistically with Yann Perreau, the evening's other attraction.)

Her voice oscillated thrillingly between childish spite and ethereal operatic osmosis. Camille delivered her diary-like songs well-oiled and with almost casual dexterity but, in doing so, seemed to diminish them. At a scant 60 minutes, she left little room to venture into the unknown.

Isabelle Le Doussal is a slinky vamp on stage, all legs and arms and strut and utter devotion to the thumping funky basics of the Prototypes' mutant punk-rock-electro sound (courtesy of guitarist François Marché and bassist and synthist Stéphane Bodin).

Vocally, she's a Gallic-chic cross between Joan Jett and Blondie (with a strawberry blond bouffe that would've made '60s yé-yé star France Gall green with envy). She brings coquettish élan to the charmingly cliché English phrases punctuating her art school slogans, threats and commands ("Danse à la merde qui passe à la radio!").

No self-absorbed meandering here; Isabelle goes for broke in a beeline, hurling herself into the updated T-Rexy sound with body language out of West Side Story. There's brains behind the swagger; she and bandmates quoted from Bo Diddley's jungle-rumble Mona and the Stones' slick, stealthy Sympathy for the Devil in the same song. Le Doussal is one of the most purely pleasurable singers to watch these days, giving the rockeuse prototype a touch of class.

Today at FrancoFolies

BEST BET

Somewhere between Nanette and Marjo is **Andrée Watters**, Quebec's most unpretentious female rocker, with a penchant for riding ragged edges. She plays at L'Aire Ford Focus at 9 and 11 p.m. Another promising free concert joins two crafty alt-French tunesmiths, **Ben Ricour** and **Émily Loizeau**, at Le Monde Pop Desjardins stage at 9 p.m. **Bazbaz**, also from France, mixes reggae, blues and rumba to melancholic effect at 6 p.m. at L'Aire Ford Focus. On a slow night indoors, the boogaloo-funk of the Colombian-Quebec combo **Roberto López Project** is worth dancing to at Le Monde multiculturel Hydro-Québec, at 7 and 10 p.m.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

THE SHOWS

3 and 5 p.m. Les Petites Tounes, Chapiteau Le Lait stage.
4 and 7 p.m. Le Bestiaire Étincelant, Le Monde Forain Le Lait stage.
5 p.m. Christian (Kit) Goguen, La Place Loto-Québec stage.
6 p.m. Bazbaz, L'Aire Ford Focus stage.
6 p.m. Cyrz and Nicolas Jules, Le Monde Pop Desjardins stage.
7 and 9 p.m. NulSIDécouvert, Le Monde Hip-Hop Vidéotron stage.
7 and 10 p.m. Roberto López Project, Le Monde multiculturel Hydro-Québec stage.
8 p.m. AS Dragon, La Zone Molson Dry stage.
8 and 10 p.m. Léoparleur, La Place Loto-Québec stage.
8 p.m. Carte Blanche à Isabelle Boulay, with Dany Bédar, Paul Daraiche, Stephen Faulkner and others, Théâtre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts. Tickets: $34.50 to $54.50.
8 and 10 p.m. Station 2 x 4, Chapiteau Le Lait stage.
8:30 p.m. Natasha St. Pier, Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd. Tickets: $34.50.
9 p.m. Ben Ricour and Émily Loizeau, Le Monde Pop Desjardins stage.
9 and 11 p.m. Andrée Watters, L'Aire Ford Focus stage.
10 p.m. Surprise show, La Zone Molson Dry stage.

FESTIVAL FACTS

FrancoFolies continues until June 18. Outdoor shows take place in the area bordered by Ste. Catherine St., President Kennedy Ave., Bleury and St. Urbain Sts. Shows are free unless otherwise noted. Information: www.francofolies. com or (514) 876-8989 or 1-(888)-444-9114.

REVIEW

Yundi Li summons rare, raw power

SONATA ERUPTS

International Viola Congress wraps up

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS
THE GAZETTE

"All's well that ends well," said Ladies' Morning Musical Club president Constance Pathy about the rescheduled appearance of Deutsche Grammophon recording star Yundi Li. The saying might be applied to the piano recital itself, yesterday in Pollack Hall.

Occupying the second half was Liszt's Sonata in B Minor, a familiar masterpiece that can seem new with every hearing, given a sufficient input of energy and conviction. Neither was lacking in this account, which featured some of the most volcanic fortissimos I have ever heard from this piano.

From the opening minutes this young Chinese pianist summoned a species of eruptive power missing from the version filed last month by Maurizio Pollini. True, the latter master, with exacting finger work, was able to summon more prismatic tonal effects, and a connoisseur might well complain about interludes of low resolution in Li's more lavishly pedalled account.

But his sheer bravado proved decisive. Were LMMC subscribers thinking the matter over during the 20-second interlude of silence separating the last note from the first sound of hands clapping?

In the first half we heard a forgettable Mozart Sonata K. 330. The slowed-down coda of the Andante cantabile would have represented a surprising lapse in judgement from a conservatory student. Schumann's Carnaval was next. There were a few typical romantic touches, but so what?

Yundi Li's sheer bravado proved decisive.

The prevailing question was whether the Pollack Hall Steinway sounded shrill because of the way it was being played or because it needs an overhaul. Those options are not mutually exclusive. A high A Sharp in the Liszt made a clanging sound that would have delighted John Cage.

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The just-concluded **International Viola Congress** at the Université de Montréal was well-stacked with concerts. On Friday we heard four violists play four concertos with I Musici de Montréal.

Mozart's Clarinet Concerto was appropriated by Lars Anders Tomter, a Norwegian. The famous Adagio – a work normally equated with the soul of the clarinet – went surprisingly well, the vibrato of the viola making up for the distinctive tone of the original instrument. Intonation was faulty in the outer movements.

Stamitz's conventional Concerto No. 2 was a good format for Antoine Tamestit's virtuosity, but the modern works were more interesting. The world premiere of a concerto by Roberto Sierra, a Puerto Rican composer, offered some fine writing in a modal Bartokian language (two percussionists were deftly deployed). Alas, no application of warm sound from soloist Roberto Diaz could atone for the fundamental unmusicality of this music.

Alexina Louie's more experimental Winter Music created a sensual palette in the first of its four movements. I would count this, along with the Mozart Adagio, as a success. Steven Dann played well, but the busy passage work in this score did not often permit him to create a characteristic "viola" sound.

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